

Unless we extend our institutions (our laboratories) as well as ourselves individually, the flower will still be forgotten, the pearls will remain trapped and all people will be much poorer because we would not truly try.

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(1) William Carlos Williams, "*Deep Religious Faith*", from **The Desert Music** now available in **Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems**, (New York: New Directions, 1962), p.96.

(2) Clara J. McLaughlin, M.D., **The Black Parents' Handbook**, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), p.29.

(3) Henry Dumas, "*Harlem Gulp*", **Play Ebony Play Ivory**, (New York: Random House, 1974), p.33.

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### **John G. Reynolds**

#### **SOCIAL TRANSACTIONS AND THE NATURE OF SELF**

Marx was once moved to write: "*Let us assume man to be man, and his relation to the world a human one.*" (1) We may find this an astonishing thing to say, but all of us are only too aware of how people use others in their social relationships both at work and play. Indeed, we are all too ready to treat others as 'objects' and be preoccupied with the instrumental usefulness of our encounters. However, involvement in such manipulative relationships inevitably has repercussions on our own selves and the selves of our 'objects', and also of course on the social world which we constantly create and recreate through our social transactions. It is the intention here to briefly examine these repercussions consequent upon adopting what might be termed an alienated stance in our interactions and to point up the ineludable commitment that we all have to the social life which we inevitably transform. The foundation on which such discussions must of course be grounded is that most fundamental of all notions in the human sciences - the nature of self.

Becker (2) has expressed the view that the main problem of modern social psychology is to reconcile the view that man is a more or less integrated personality with the view that man is an historical actor. Thus if one follows for example the tradition of James or Mead, an integrated theory of personality is sacrificed even while an understanding of the social and historical nature of the human self is gained. On the other hand, if one recognises a really tight theory of personality like Freud's, it can be argued that the view of man as a highly modifiable, historical creation, is lost. However, the problem for a social psychology is not to divine purpose in nature, to explain human actions in terms of the meeting of inner drives. To seek to explain the forward momentum of conduct is, as Gerth and Mills (3) have stated, a *pseudo/problem*".

One does not have to explain why animals move - it is a fact that one can easily accept and indeed must accept. The problem is merely to describe and explain what is peculiar about human action, and for this, as Gerth and Mills put it:

*"Word-motives suffice. If the problem of action no longer resides in meeting the demands of inner drives, then it must reside in meeting the problems of external situations." (4)*

Hence man is a unique animal species in that he is also an historical development, and it is in terms of this development that he must be defined. He creates his destiny as a member of society and he comes into being as he transacts with the social world. And it is thus that to deceive, or to treat a fellow being as an '*object*' for manipulation is misanthropic. As Buber (5) put it:

*"men need, and it is granted to them, to confirm one another in their individual beings by means of genuine meetings."*

Thus there can be no coming into being of self without the active development of self-powers, and to lose self-powers on the other hand is also to lose community, for once one's activities become unrelated to one's powers, one is estranged from others. All that then confronts one is alien, one has no responsibility for the free creation of it, nor any involvement in it. We all then have clear responsibilities to relate to one another in a properly human way, and it is thus that the possibilities are there for a truly human society. However, there are those who would hold that inauthenticity in our social transactions is inevitable and in fact desirable.

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Thus some would argue that the question is not whether or not we should adopt false fronts or wear masks in our encounters but rather which mask should we wear. Lyman and Scott (6) for example state that achieving ends for man involves managing appearances. We would argue here of course that the wearing of masks is in itself potentially harmful. What might be termed these Goffmanesque practices (7) have also been defended by Hall (8) in that, on the basis of Goffman's view of self, it would be neither simple nor even desirable to abolish them. Thus Hall sees fronts and masks as:

*"enabling devices to be welcomed in allowing human beings to establish an identity of their own at their own pace, and thus to increase their sense of identity." (9)*

Masks are thus presented as devices behind which self can develop with the minimum of interference, and Hall and writers of his persuasion argue in fact that what might be called the existential demand to be one's self at

all costs is an essentially anti-social one. However, there would appear to be a contradiction in such arguments and this comes out in Hall most clearly when he points out that in Goffman's work it is always hard to tell if people are presenting themselves accurately and just as hard to tell whether they are reacting to your presentations honestly. He argues that this latter point is important:

*"In that inaccurate feed-back may well lead to illusions about one's own self." (10)*

Thus he would seem to be admitting that masks are as Gouldner (11) put it:

*"the barrier that (isolate) men from one another, the glittering exterior that (alienate) them from themselves."*

The argument then that authenticity should be distrusted and that it is desirable that masks should be donned because they are devices behind which self develops, would not seem to hold. Men do indeed need, and it should be granted to them, the confirmation of one another in their individual beings by means of genuine meetings. It is incumbent on us to engage fully with our fellow beings. (12) We must 'risk' finding human connections and human solidarity, even if becoming so locked into relationships limits the means that we can employ. In Goffman's terminology, our movements may be impeded from 'game' to 'game' but to opt for detachment is to opt for a hardening of the self to endure isolation in order that our market options should not be pre-empted.

Human identities then are socially bestowed and must also be socially sustained and fairly steadily so. It must never be forgotten that people come into being as they transact with the social world and we must not discourage, distrust or avoid those very processes that help men know who they are. We may not be dealers in inaccurate feedback when human identity is at stake. We are morally bound to engage fully in social life and indeed it is the relationships that we build up that go to make up the very active processes of life. We must be properly aware of our human obligations and the possible impact of our activities in the social world. As Sombart (13) so pointedly wrote:

*"Either economic interests, in the broadest sense, or love interests, form the central point of all of life's importance. One lives either to work or else to love. Work implies saving, love implies spending."*

## References and Notes

- (1) Quoted in Trilling, L. (1974), **Sincerity and Authenticity**, Oxford: University of Oxford Press, p.124.

- (2) Becker, E. (1965), "*Mills social psychology and the great historical convergence on the problem of alienation*", Chapter 7, in Horowitz, J.L. (ed.), **The New Sociology: essays in social science and social theory in honour of C. Wright Mills**, New York: Oxford University Press.
  - (3) Gerth, H. and Mills, C.W. (1954), **Character and Social Structure**, New York, Routledge & Kegan Paul.
  - (4) Gerth & Mills, p.110.
  - (5) Buber, M. (1957), "*Distance and Relation*", **Psychiatry**, 20.
  - (6) Lyman, J.M. & Scott, M.B. (1970), **A Sociology of the Absurd**, New York: Appleton - Century - Crofts.
  - (7) See for example Goffman, E. (1971), *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books.
  - (8) Hall, J.A. (1977), "*Sincerity and politics: Existentialists vs Goffman and Proust*", **The Sociological Review**, 25 (3), pp.535-550.
  - (9) Hall, p.548.
  - (10) Hall, p.542.
  - (11) Galdner, A.W. (1971), **The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology**, London: Heinemann Educational Books, p.386.
  - (12) Laing, R.D. (1965), **The Divided Self**, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, of course has stated that: "*Everyone in some measure wears a mask, there are many things we do not put ourselves into fully. In ordinary life it seems hardly possible for it to be otherwise*".p.88. Nonetheless we are arguing here that we must always endeavour to engage in properly human transactions and this irrespective of their duration because it is not possible to know how much 'investment' the other is making even in the most objectively short meeting.
  - (13) Sombart, W. (1966), *Der Bourgeois*, Paris, Payet.
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